

TWO ANGRY SISTERS AND THEIR RECENTLY DECEASED BROTHER
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Psalm 116
John 11:1-44

**“I am the resurrection and the life.
Those who believe in me,
though they die, will live.”
John 11:25 (NRSV)**

We know about the powers of death,
powers that persist . . . that drive us from you,
and from our neighbor, and from our best selves.
We know about the powers of fear and greed and anxiety,
and brutality and certitude.
And then you . . . you at dawn,
you in the darkness,
you who breaks the world to joy.
Yours is the kingdom—not the kingdom of death
Yours is the power—not the power of death
Yours is the glory—not the glory of death
Yours . . . You . . . and we give thanks
For the newness beyond our achieving.

Walter Brueggemann
Awed to Heaven, Rooted in Earth

*You come among us
sometimes quietly and inconspicuously.
And sometimes you come to confront
our deepest needs and fears and hopes.
So, this morning, this Lenten Sunday,
come and be with us and
open our hearts and minds and eyes
to see a light shining in the darkness,
your Word made flesh,
Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

I've been thinking a lot about signs recently, because the Gospel of John calls a series of stories about Jesus, and people who encounter him, signs—

signs that point to the startling theological claim that the Fourth Gospel makes: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” Jesus is the Word of God in the flesh.

Signs are a good thing. If you have ever been in a place without signs, you have a sense of what it means to be vulnerable and lost, as I found myself last week in an SUV full of Presbyterians wandering through the hill country of West Texas on our way to dinner. There weren’t many signs, and we were late and no one seemed to know where we were exactly, and the thought does occur to you, in that situation, that you might never get there, might spend the rest of your life looking for a sign. Street signs, route signs, Interstate and bypass signs, get us where we want to go. The thing about a sign, when you think about it, is that in and of itself it isn’t much. It may be a beautifully designed sign, but its importance, its purpose, is in the truth it conveys. A sign exists to tell you something about the future.

I’ve been known, at times, to miss a sign: I’m listening to the radio, looking at the scenery, thinking about the next sermon, and the person in the passenger seat, who, by the way, never misses a sign, gently asks, “Did you see that sign?” or “I think you missed a sign back there.” So another thing about signs is that it’s good if you have someone else to help you see and interpret.

I’ve been thinking about signs recently because that’s what the author of the Gospel of John—to which we are paying attention in this Lenten season—calls the series of events, of encounters with Jesus, that he describes. They are signs. They point somewhere else; they want us to look ahead. That sounds fairly simple, but frankly, we have a lot of trouble with it. We have trouble looking beyond the sign, because we can’t get past its interesting details, its bright color and unique shape. So when it comes to a story that is meant to be a sign, instead of asking what it is pointing to, we ask, “Is it true?” Instead of asking about the truth about the future to which the sign points, we ask, “Did it really happen like that? Really now—things like that don’t happen. Water into wine, walking on water, and a dead man walking out of his tomb still bound up in his grave clothes? Really?” If we decide to spend our time thinking about that—in this case, the biological plausibility of a dead man coming back to life, did it really happen like that, and how did it happen—we’ll never get to the truth to which the sign is pointing.

This story that is a sign is about death and life. It is a story about one of the toughest things that ever happens to any of us: someone you love, really love, becomes gravely ill and dies. Over the years it happens to every one of us. A parent dies, sometimes much, much too early. My father died when I was thirty and he was fifty-eight. I was just getting to know him. I still think

about my loss. The first time a close friend your age becomes gravely ill and dies right in the middle of life, you can't believe it's really happening, and maybe for the first time, you start to think about your own mortality.

Jesus, in addition to having his parents, his brothers and sisters, and his disciples, had three very close friends. They were about his age, thirty or so: two sisters, Martha and Mary, and their brother, Lazarus. The three siblings lived together in a house in the little village of Bethany, two miles outside Jerusalem. They were Jesus' adult friends, the ones you want to have dinner with, the friends you go on vacation with, the ones with whom you don't have to pretend to be anyone but who you are. Friends like that are very precious. We don't know if Jesus had many friends like that. But we do know that these three are those kind of friends. He eats at their table. He talks things over with them. He tells funny stories with them. When he needs a place to stay overnight during a visit to Jerusalem, he stays with them. As his own story is coming to an end, he will stay with them, in their house at Bethany, just two miles outside of Jerusalem, every night until the last one, the day he died. There is a lot of literature about friendship between men: how difficult it is, for some reason, for men to have good and deep relationships with other men, how rare it is and therefore how precious. So I think Lazarus was Jesus' best friend, maybe his only male friend. He called his disciples, the company of men and women who followed him, friends. But Lazarus was a true friend.

Martha and Mary send word to Jesus: "Lazarus is sick, really sick. We don't know whether he's going to make it." They've heard the same stories as everybody has heard, how Jesus made a blind man see and healed a sick little boy. Maybe, just maybe, he could heal Lazarus, but at least Jesus needs to be here with his friend in his hour of need, and he ought to be here with us.

You would assume Jesus would drop everything and rush to Bethany to the bedside of his best friend. He doesn't. He stays where he is for several days. And then he decides to go. It's dangerous. There is growing concern about him in Jerusalem, among the religious leaders, about what he's up to, the crowds that gather, the potential for public disorder. Some people are calling him the Messiah, the one who will lead the people to throw off the yoke of their oppressors. The religious and political leaders in Jerusalem live with constant fear of a Roman crackdown, and frankly, this Jesus sounds like trouble. One of the twelve, Thomas, understands the risk of going to Bethany, just two miles outside the capitol city. "Let's go and die with him," Thomas says.

So they set out. Jesus has delayed—dallied, you might say. And sure enough, Lazarus dies before he gets there. Friends from the village have already gathered at the home. They bring food; they sit with the devastated sisters;

trying to be helpful, they say comforting things; and they weep along with them, which is sometimes all you can do to be helpful in that situation.

Martha sees Jesus coming down the road, runs out to meet him. And she's not happy. "You're too late. You might have been able to help. At least you could have stood by his bedside and held his hand; you could have at least told him you loved him and said good-bye."

Martha and Jesus exchange the kind of customary euphemisms we reach for at the funeral home: "He's in a better place now." We don't know what else to say. And to Martha, Jesus says the most astounding, astonishing thing: "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even those who die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die."

Martha runs to tell her sister, Mary, that Jesus has finally shown up. Frances Taylor Gench, whose book about these stories we have been following, says about the two sisters, "Don't you just love these uppity women?" In a time when women were regarded as chattel, property, Mary and Martha insist on being taken seriously, and they are angry. Mary is just as irritated with Jesus as Martha is: "What took you so long? He's already dead," Mary says, overcome again with her grief. Finally Jesus shows some emotion. When he sees the neighbors weeping, sees Mary, dissolved in tears, he weeps too, finally—weeps for his friend, for his dear friend Lazarus, who is now dead and in his tomb and has been for four days. "Show me where he is buried," says Jesus.

Finally Jesus arrives at the tomb. "Open it." Martha, ever fastidious, always practical, calls attention to a delicate detail: "There's going to be an odor." Jesus continues: "Open it"—one more interruption—he prays to God. The neighbors, the mourners, are there too. They have come along to see what would happen. They are fascinated, obviously. Who wouldn't be? Maybe they are also terrified.

"Lazarus, come out," says a loud voice piercing the shimmering heat. And Lazarus walks out, grave clothes and all, blinking in the bright, midday sun.

What is it a sign of?

"In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. . . . And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." "In him was life and the life was the light of the world. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not overcome it."

That's what it's a sign of: life and light that shines in the darkness; light that the darkness does not overcome.

In the popular mind, Christianity is about life after death, getting to heaven when you die, “pie in the sky by and by” as someone put it. It is about that, about a love from which not even death can separate us, about a light no darkness overcomes. But even more, it is about life now—full, rich, complete, deep, free, whole; life now. “Eternal life,” Jesus called it, a quality and depth of life that begins now, in this life, and is not interrupted by death. “I have come,” he said, “that you have life and have it fully; I have come that my life—my joy—may live in you.”

What do you suppose Lazarus did after his sisters and neighbors helped him out of his grave clothes and he walked out into the bright sunshine? My modest guess is that he said, “What’s for dinner?” My guess is that every meal was now different. Every morning when he awoke, every sunrise and sunset, every day blessed, enhanced because of the nearness of death. My guess is that his love for his sisters and their life together was so very precious that it felt almost as if it was all brand new and that he couldn’t stop thanking God for the miracle of his one and only life.

That’s what it is a sign of.

I loved something Marian Wright Edelman said once: “Do not die before you die. See and listen. Bask in the countless miracles and beauty all around you. Stay awake and alert to the incredible currents of life everywhere” (*The Sea Is So Wide and My Boat Is So Small*, p.57).

Henry David Thoreau said he wished to learn what life had to teach now “and not when I come to die, discover that I had not lived” (Francis Taylor Gench, *Encounters with Jesus*, p. 87).

My very favorite, Wendell Berry: “The question before me, now that I am old, is not how to be dead, which I know from enough practice, but how to be alive, as these worn hills still tell, and some paintings of Paul Cezanne, and this mere singing wren, who thinks he’s alive forever, this instant, and may be” (“Given”).

It is a sign that this life is so very precious precisely because it is limited. Lazarus grew old and died again, but my guess is that he lived every single day of the rest of his life with tears of gratitude in his eyes.

“Live” is the word here. Live today and every day. Open your eyes and mind and heart and soul to the stunning fact of your own life. Don’t put things off. Tell those you love that you love them. I spoke of my father last week, who taught me about grace by trusting me and who died too soon, died before the time when men said “I love you” easily, even fathers and sons. So I don’t think I ever told him I loved him. I think he knew it, but by dying he taught me never to miss it again.

The first contemporary and friend I lost years ago was not a church member. In fact she was Jewish—"sort of" is the way she put it. Bobbie and Bob were our age, had children the same age as ours. We saw them at school events, games, plays, concerts, and at parties. She was happy, effervescent, talkative, stylish, full of life. And then came an inoperable brain tumor she had six months, maybe a year. So she called me and came to my study. Laughing, she said she was talking to her rabbi too, but she thought she'd cover all her bases by talking with me.

"I'm not afraid," she said, sitting in my office with a bright, fashionable scarf on her head, "but what should I do with the time I have left?" It is, of course, the most important question for every one of us.

I copied and gave her something I had read from a letter Abraham Maslov wrote while recuperating from a heart attack:

The confrontation with death makes everything look so precious, so sacred, so beautiful that I feel more strongly than ever the impulse to love it, embrace it, and to let myself be overwhelmed by it. My river has never looked so beautiful. Death and the ever-present possibility makes love more possible. I wonder if we could love passionately, if ecstasy would be possible at all, if we know we'd never die (quoted by Rollo May, *Love and Death*, p.99).

She kept that and asked if I would read it and speak at her funeral at her synagogue—which I did—with the promise, which I believe is for all of us, that there is nothing to fear because there is a light shining in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it, that we can live and laugh because death itself is dead.

"Death is dead." Those words are from a remarkable play written by Eugene O'Neill, *Lazarus Laughed*. In one scene Lazarus is facing Caligula, the Roman emperor, a symbol of everything that is overwhelmingly powerful and controlling and life-threatening in this life, a symbol of death. Instead of groveling or begging for mercy, Lazarus laughs. The chorus says, "Laugh! Laugh! Fear is no more! Death is dead!"

That is the truth to which this sign points us: "Death is dead." Take off your grave clothes. Leave behind everything that binds you, everything that limits you, everything that keeps you from being everything God created you to be. Walk into the sunshine and live every single day of your life fully, with the tears of gratitude, for the miracle of it, in your eyes.

Jesus is walking toward his death now—a final visit to the city, a last supper, a cross looms—but so does Easter and another empty tomb. He has already begun to do what he came to do; there is light shining in the darkness.

Death is dead.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.